(Mis)understandings of Disaster in Chinese History:
The Case of the Gansu Earthquake of 1920
followed by a presentation on DisasterHistory.org
By Dr Pierre Fuller

Date : 13 Oct 2015
Time : 16:00 - 17:30
Venue : Asia Research Institute Seminar Room
        Tower Block Level 10, 469A Bukit Timah Road
        National University of Singapore @ BTC

CHAIRPERSON

Dr Christopher Courtney, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT

Considering the sheer size and frequency of drought-famine, epidemics and other disasters in Chinese history, scholarship on local governance and society during these crises is surprisingly thin. Moreover, the limited literature that does exist is not readily accessible to the public and has little bearing on non-specialist understandings of the Chinese past. This talk aims to address both of these problems in turn. It first presents a historical case study, focusing on the challenges the speaker has faced researching the great Gansu (Haixian) earthquake of 1920. The presentation then introduces a collaborative project with colleagues in the field to bring scholarship on disasters in Chinese history to bear on the wider academic and policy worlds.

The Gansu earthquake of 1920, likely the twentieth century’s second-deadliest earthquake, remains surprisingly obscure, having attracted little academic attention in either Chinese or English. Reasons for this range from the remoteness of the affected region to the remarkable paucity of records on relief and reconstruction in the quake’s immediate aftermath. The talk examines one aspect of the speaker’s investigation of this event, tracing the process through which radical intellectuals in 1920s China effaced local military and gentry relief actors from quake narratives. It offers a window onto the politicization of disaster remembrance in the service of revolutionary objectives and raises questions about the integrity of the historical record on humanitarian subjects generally.

The talk then turns to DisasterHistory.org, a soon-to-be launched website based at the University of Manchester, which aims to serve as a web portal and clearinghouse of academic work on Chinese disasters. As it grows, the site aims to offer a platform of rigorous yet accessible research on disasters generally to benefit researchers, journalists, policy-makers, and the general public, and to serve as a space for collaborative research and data-sharing for experts worldwide.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Pierre Fuller is Lecturer in the History Department, School of Arts, Languages & Cultures at the University of Manchester. He holds a PhD in East Asian and World History from the University of California, Irvine, and a BA from Georgetown University. His research focuses on indigenous responses to drought and earthquake disasters in late imperial and Republican China. In 2015-16, he is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, and is also coordinator and editor of the collaborative website DisasterHistory.org.

REGISTRATION

Admission is free. We would greatly appreciate if you RSVP to Ms Tay Minghua via email: minghua.tay@nus.edu.sg.